living blues

NUMBER 17, SUMMER 1974

60 cents

In This Issue:

ESTHER PHILLIPS

HOUSTON STACKHOUSE

BEHIND THE BLUES BAR BIZ

"Baby I'm For Real"

ESTHER PHILLIPS

By Jim & Amy O'Neal

Esther Phillips, voted the No. 1 female blues singer in EBONY magazine's first Black Music Poll, sings more than just blues--in fact, she was nominated in the R&B and jazz categories of that poll, too. But as a blues singer "Little Esther" really is one of the finest. Esther's has been a tough, up-and-down career, beset by personal problems and heroin addiction as well as the usual hassles of the music business. In the past couple of years her records on the New York-based jazz label CTI/Kudu have brought her renewed popularity, and she has appeared across the United States and in Europe. She offered these comments one evening before a show at Chicago's Roberts 300 Room.

I was born in Galveston, Texas (Dec. 23, 1935). When I was three months old, we moved from Galveston to Houston. My mother moved to Watts when I was five. So I went to school out in Watts, and my mother and father were separated, so I went back to Houston to live with him when I was around nine. I would go in the summer and visit my mother. So this particular summer I started singing. I was out there so I just stayed. I was raised in church, in the sanctified church, and that's where I started singing, when I was about six.

I started singing in 1949 for Mr. Johnny Otis--Johnny Otis's band out of Los Angeles, out of Watts, actually. I slipped into his nightclub; and my sister and her friend, at that time she was a teenager, you know. In Watts they had a drink called White Port Lemon Juice. They didn't have any money for the White Port Lemon Juice, so they came home and got me and dressed me up like I was older and slipped me into the club so I could sing and win the contest. So I won first prize which was $10, and they gave me a dollar and took the nine. And took me back home and that was the end of that. After that Johnny started to look for me, and so when he found me he just told my mother that he heard I could sing and that he was interested and then we started recording for Savoy Records. I was just doing blues things; it was called rhythm and blues then. I won my amateur show off of a record Dinah Washington had out at that time called **Baby Get Lost.**

Blues singers I liked--well, of course Dinah, I like Bobby Bland, T-Bone Walker, and I like Eddie Vinson--I mean to me those are blues singers. Joe Turner, Lowell Fulson, you know, and Memphis Slim, who I really, really like. He moved to Europe, to Paris. I like Muddy Waters, I like John Lee Hooker, Lightning Hopkins--they're **blues** singers, no doubt about it. They are **really** blues singers. For women singers I like Aretha, Carmen McRae, Della Reese, Sarah Vaughan, Pearl (Bailey)--who's more of a performer, more so than a singer I would say... Billie Holiday; I like Mavis Staples very much; I like Betty Everett who is here out of Chicago; I go wild over Bessie Smith. Ma Rainey, I have a few things by her. But those are just some of my favorites, but I like most singers, anyone that can sing and is doing it. I wasn't into Bessie or Ma Rainey when I started singing. The only one I took from was Dinah. But a lot of her things came from Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. In fact that's where most of her things came from, she told me. We were sitting down talking one day and she was saying they were her idols, when she started.

As a kid I listened to Dinah Washington and then after I started singing, then I started to listen to Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker and Billie Eckstine. Those where the first black, real professional singers that I started listening to other than Dinah, bacause I had been listening to her. But I was getting so caught up in her style and everything, you know, because she just fascinated me; so the guys in the band started suggesting that I listen to other artists.

When I first started singing as a kid, I really wanted definitely, so much to sound like her; but then, as I grew older my voice changed, and I think now all I have is just the style that Dinah had, moreover than her sound, and no one could ever really get that sound--but I think what I did do was establish her style, which I liked very much. We were very good friends. She was a wonderful lady and she taught me a lot about the music business that I didn't know. She had her moments, but with me, she was like a godsend to me.

Billie Holiday was a very nice lady. I met her one time when she was very ill. About a month before she went into the hospital and died, we were at a party together. She was coughing very heavily; she'd said she was going into the hospital. I liked her--she came straight to the point; she was kind of like Dinah, just came straight to the point with anything she had to say. Most people can't hide a lot; when you're just forward and you just say whatever's on your mind, tell it like it is, it shakes a lot of people--rather than have people dress it up and tie a ribbon on it, and present it to you--I think I liked that about her. And Dinah. They would come right to the point. And say it. It would kind of hit you the wrong way, and wow ....

I only saw Lady perform twice. That was all. No, it wasn't in

Amy O'Neal